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THE FRENCH CLASSICISTS.¹

“At last Malherbe (1556-1628) came, and first in France Showed a correct cadence in prosody, Taught the force of a rightly-placed word And brought back the muse to the rules of duty. The language as improved by this cautious writer, Offered nothing rude to the cultured ear. Stanzas were taught to close with grace, And verse dared no more encroach on verse.” So Boileau heralds the advent of the first French classicist, and, though a great exaggeration by one mediocre artizan in verse of the merits of another, these lines represented fairly enough the sentiment of the age of Louis XIV., while the fateful error they involved was portentous to French verse for more than two centuries of pseudo-classical artificiality and stagnation. The qualities on which Boileau insists are metrical polish, meticulous accuracy in rhymes, greater diligence in the rhetorical arrangement and a more anxious care in the choice of words, the whole joining in what might be justly described as a zealous and untiring pursuit of the commonplace. As might be anticipated, then, Malherbe will never shock, but he will never thrill. There is no flash of genius in the poems, and, so far as can be seen, there was none in the man. Why, then, were these qualities, that fifty years before would not have raised a poet above nameless mediocrity, capable of making a leader in 1600? What peculiar conjuncture made readers turn from the kernel to the husk? What suffered the genius of R  gnier to be a voice crying in the wilderness, while a vastly inferior poet became the prophet of successive generations till the Revolution came to make all things new.

¹ Emile Faguet: *Dix-Septi  me Si  cle, Etudes Litt  raires*. Ferdinand Bruneti  re: *Etudes Critiques*. Ferdinand Bruneti  re: *Evolution des Genres*. George Saintsbury: *Short History of French Literature*, and several articles in *Encyclop  dia Britannica*.

To understand this aberration of æsthetic taste we must look beyond literature to the political and religious world. The Renaissance had been a period of unrest, of reaching out in untried directions of tentative effort, of a confident iconoclasm, too, and of strongly developed individualism. This is the spirit of the earlier half of the sixteenth century. Then follows a growing lack of faith in the new learning as a panacea for human ills, but as yet there is no loss of individuality. Each writer strikes out on his own line, cares little for precedent or law in language or metre, so that he can say what he has in him to say. Originality is more prized than correct diction, strength than polish. So while these men left admirable work behind them, each writer's legacy to the world was stamped with a singularity that made it little adapted to form a school or train a succession. The Renaissance had sacrificed the old principle of authority to freedom of inquiry in many departments of intellectual and ethical life. In literature this freedom resulted in a division of energy, remarkable in its immediate results, but without promise of healthy development and continuous growth.

By the end of the sixteenth century the reaction came. The wars of the League had been a cruel deception to the high-strung hopes of a new era of peace and good will, the sphere of human knowledge had been widened beyond the hope of individual grasp, and the limitation of the mind was brought home to it with crushing weight. The intellectual lassitude that resulted found its expression in criticism rather than in fresh creation. Save R  gnier, who appears as one born out of due time, the first half the seventeenth century shows no great lyric or epic poet, and when at last La Fontaine appears he is a very *enfant terrible* to his contemporary critics who praise his defects and bear with his virtues. In prose, too, the best work is critical and analytic. The drama, because more directly in touch with the people, preserved a more independent life, yielding least and latest. But Malherbe expressed the state of mind of the cultured

men of the time ; he is the herald of what is typical in the classical school, the "Age of Louis XIV." His poetry was an art. It could be learned, weighed, measured. You could calculate the percentages of imperfect or cognate rhymes, of incorrect verses, of words and phrases that presumed to stir the mind from a becoming balance of calm repose. This age understood *this* poetry. But when it saw these very qualities transfused by the fire of Ronsard's genius, who had done all that was ever claimed for his pedantic successor, *that* was an individuality that defied mechanical criticism and wearied minds already predisposed to make great sacrifices for order and propriety in the state, and in literature also.

So the naturalism of the Pléiade was obscured by a studied artificiality against which Régnier fought a losing fight, though his satires are among the most vigorous that French literature has to show and contain a powerful attack on Malherbe and the upas-tree of his overweening criticism, while several of his short poems are delightful in their pathos or graceful wit. Malherbe's merit on the other hand is almost wholly formal. He wrote very little, for the most part occasional verses addressed to the court or aristocracy, but it is hard to read that little without weariness at its mediocrity, whose great fault is that he has not virility enough to err. Personally his biographer and pupil, Racan, shows him as a man of petty and presumptuous arrogance, a quality illustrated by his attitude toward Ronsard, whom he first plundered of all that he was capable of valuing and then mocked with systematic depreciation. The spark that helps some of his verses, *e. g.* the Consolation Ode, to an asthmatic life is Ronsard's, the spirit that insists on rhyming for eye as well as ear, that forbids the linking of words etymologically connected or of proper nouns, that seeks curiously, as his biographer tells us, "for rare and sterile rhymes," that spirit is all his own. The sixteenth century had no need to covet it, nor was the seventeenth the better for its inspiration.

Malherbe's Art of Poetry, like that of the Meistersinger in Germany, was something that could be taught on a tally-board, and he had worthy disciples, artisans in verse such as Racan, with some true poetic gift and a more genuine appreciation of nature. Voiture, a graceful but "idle singer of an empty day," the anacreontic St. Amant, and others whose names are shadows. But the muse that had been thus "brought back to the rules of duty" was presently to be drilled in them by a master of deportment more strict than Malherbe had ever been. This man who did most to clip the wings of the French Pegasus was Boileau, a mischievously satirical pedant (1636-1711) whose critical *obiter dicta* were long regarded as sacred by French critics and French schoolmasters. He was fairly acquainted with Latin, and his lack of familiarity with the Greek poets may be excused by his obvious inability to appreciate them, but his indifference to the contemporary literary movement in other countries was only paralleled by his ignorance of the earlier writers of his own. Still, though Boileau lacked taste, he had much rough good-sense, and his destructive criticism, so far as it applied to his contemporaries, was usually just, though it may have been unnecessary. Especially does one hold in grateful remembrance the death-blow given to chivalrous romance by his *Dialogue sur les Héros*. But the positive influence of Boileau was deadening and narrowing. His *Art Poétique*, of which Dryden has a translation and Pope a paraphrase, proclaimed with sufficient talent to persuade a degenerating taste that poetry was artificially raised to a science. He imposed upon many men of no genius, and, perhaps, stifled the genius of some; his only scholar whose genius survived the teaching was Racine. The latter's talent could profit by instructions that would have trammelled Corneille and amused Molière.

This, for instance, is his ideal, not for one good line, but for an indefinite succession of them :

Que toujours dans vos vers le sens coupant les mots
Suspende l' hémistiche, en marque le repos.

These he regards as the essential limitations of tragedy :

Qu' en un lieu, qu' en un jour, un seul fait accompli
Tienne jusqu' à la fin le théâtre rempli.

And even so tragedy must not have a christian basis, as we see from these lines directed against Corneille's "Polyeucte" and "Théodore :

De la foi d' un chrétien les mystères terribles
D' ornements égayés ne sont pas susceptibles.

Not even in comedy may a Molière study the manners of the vulgar herd :

(Molière) Peutêtre de son art eut remporté le prix,
Si, moins ami du peuple, en ses doctes peintures
Il n'eut pas fait souvent grimacer ses figures.

For elegance of language is a prime and universal necessity :

Sans la langue, en un mot, l'auteur le plus divin
Est toujours, quoiqu'il fasse, un méchant écrivain.

And there must be no vagaries of genius : "Tout doit tendre au bon sens," indeed it might be better to be frivolous than incorrect : "Imitons de Marot l'élégant badinage." And yet he could say : "Que la nature donc soit votre étude unique," and he was sincere, only "nature" to him was a very narrow segment of the sphere seen through glasses that both colored and distorted it. For, as he has said himself : "Le vers se sent toujours les bassesses du cœur."

As different from Boileau as a winding woodland stream from a well-kept canal is La Fontaine, a true and naturalistic poet, who calmly ignored the traditional rules of his art and won the hearts of critics who shook their heads. It was impossible to deny his wit and winning grace, and the unambitious fable or tale in which he clothed them, seemed a less dangerous breach of the rules than more serious efforts would have done. The court and its critics could pardon the frailty of a sylvan muse, when they would have been

pitiless to an error of Melpomene. So La Fontaine preserved and handed down the tradition of metrical liberty to the Romantic poets of 1830.

La Fontaine's first work of importance, the first book of his "Contes," dates from 1664 and his forty-third year. Already he had become socially popular, and had been intimately associated with Boileau, Molière, and Racine. More "Contes" (1666) were followed by "Fables" (1668) and the year 1671 shows his versatile genius as editor of a volume of mystically religious verse, as author of "Contes" whose humor was very unrestrained, and of "Fables," whose equal humor was quite without this gallic spice. These seven years were the best fruitage of his long, easy, and irresponsible life. For La Fontaine seems never to have quite outlived the carelessness of childhood, a trait that impressed all his friends, and is reflected in the words with which Louis licensed his election to the Academy (1683): "Il a promis d'être sage." After this he wrote only "Fables." His friends took care of him when his wife declined the burden. He died after a tardy conversion to the religiosity that the aged Louis had made popular, in 1685. Endless anecdotes tell of his guileless simplicity and absent-mindedness. His intimates called him the "good fellow." Of them all Molière alone, perhaps, justly appreciated his literary importance. "Our wits labor in vain; they will not outlive the bonhomme," he said when once he overheard Boileau and Racine chaffing their common friend. And he was right, for he has always been more read than either of them, and as time goes on, it is felt that he was of greater service than they, a consummation doubtless very far from the dreams of either the critic or the tragedian.

The "Fables" and the "Contes" have exercised a deep and permanent influence both on French literature and on our own. La Fontaine's miscellaneous work, though often good, is less individual and little read. His "Contes" are essentially *fabliaux* developed by a studied prosody and

delicate feeling for style, coupled with a skill in narration that is the height of art in its apparent ease and naturalness. He is the true continuator of de la Salle, of des Periers, and of Marguerite. Now neither he, nor they, nor their Italian fellows, recognized what we to-day hold to be fundamental conventions of decency. Their stories deal very largely with subjects not now admitted to polite literary circles, but then regarded as not unbecoming even by such irreproachable ladies as Madame de Sévigné. The same thing is observable in English literature. If these "Contes" are to be read at all, it must be in the simple, naïve spirit in which they were written. There is no sniggering about them, no conscious pandering to vice. They represent a phase in the development of European morals. Not the lusty joy of life of Boccaccio and his fellows with their eager love of sense and beauty after centuries of ascetic repression, nor yet the "subtle mixture of passion and sensuality, of poetry and appetite," that we find in Marguerite and Ronsard. The Renaissance is no longer a revolutionary force, and what was a passionate cult to Boccaccio becomes in La Fontaine the elfish naturalism of a satyr child. Read in the spirit of the writer, the "Contes" are charming, read in the spirit of modern prudery, they are earthly and sensual. Of course, if we choose, we may clasp our hands with the Pharisee and thank God we are not as these men were, or we may fix the difference without drawing the comparison. We have no right to judge the work of one century by the moral standards of another.

There is no need of any such reserve, however, when we turn to the "Fables." They were, are, and always will be, wholly delightful in the graceful liveliness of their narration and the homely worldly wisdom of their unobtrusive moral. One knows not whether to admire more the varied mastery of the form, the accurate analysis and observation of human nature, or the boldness with which, in the later books, he uses the fable as a cover for political teaching that is sometimes startlingly radical. As Saintsbury has gracefully

said: "The child rejoices in the freshness and vividness of the story, the eager student of literature in the consummate art with which it is told, the experienced man of the world in the subtle reflections on character and life which it conveys." Thus in a double sense these "Fables" are not of one age but for all ages, and for all men, except it be poets of the type of Lamartine, who could discern only "limping, disjointed, unequal verses, without symmetry either in the ear or on the page," in stanzas where others find a most original and studied harmony.

The "Fables" of La Fontaine are familiar to every French school boy, acquaintance with his work is presumed in all cultivated society, turns of expression and phrases taken from them fall as naturally from the lips and pens of educated Frenchmen as biblical phrases did, and perhaps still do, from New England Puritans. The universal acquaintance with his work influenced and aided the emancipation of poetry by the school of 1830, especially among those who still did homage to Boileau with their lips though their hearts were elsewhere. For La Fontaine is very great, perhaps supreme, but it is in a kind of poetry that is not great. Therefore, though he is the best fabulist and best story-teller that is known to French literature, he is not a great poet. But he is the one poet of his century who is still generally read and enjoyed, and except for R  gnier he is about the only poet who deserves to be.¹

It was natural that the prose of the early part of the seventeenth century should suffer less from artificiality than lyric poetry, the most sensitive of all literary forms; but it, too, felt the reaction, and there is nothing to recall the verve of Rabelais, the force of Montaigne, or the grace of Marguerite, in the work of the first third of the century. In fiction the changed spirit shows itself in imitation of the Spanish novelists, the chief instigators in Europe of the movement known to English students as Euphuism. This

¹ Boileau is read in schools, but he has no popular hold as a poet and he is losing his hold as a critic.

studied affectation showed itself in France as elsewhere chiefly in chivalrous romances. The immediate model was the "Amadis," translated late in the previous century. No one to-day reads D'Urfé's "Astrée" nor the interminable volumes of Scudéry's "Grand Cyrus" and "Clélie," and it is only with amused curiosity that we glance at the latter's map of "Tenderland" with its river "Inclination," its villages "Attention," "Verses," "Epistles," and the ponderous apparatus of its elaborate allegory. In their day these works were immensely popular and that among the most cultured. But if the disease was acute, the remedy was speedy, and it came from the same source as the evil. All analogy would lead the student to expect a reaction from this overstrained sentiment to coarse naturalism, but Scarron, whose "Roman Comique" inaugurated the revolt, got his inspiration from the Spanish *novela picaresca*, as did his follower Le Sage. The corresponding though later movement in England, begun by De Foe and continued by Smollett, owes much to the same source. A more independent social study is Furetière's "Roman Bourgeois" (1666) a "human document" for middle class Parisian life of this period. Meantime however the study of individual character was being pursued on the same lines of careful observation by Madame de Lafayette, whose "Princesse de Clèves" (1677) is the starting point of the modern novel as distinct from romance. Yet this momentous change in the character of fiction received no critical notice. Indeed, just as naturalism was thus announcing its advent, the court coterie were seized with a fancy for writing prose fables, fairy tales, of which vast numbers were born to an ephemeral life toward the close of this and the beginning of the next century. The best in this shadowy kind is Perrault, the French god-father of "Puss in Boots," "Red-Riding Hood," "The Sleeping Beauty," and "Tom Thumb."

Outside the sphere of fiction the seventeenth century opens with Jean de Balzac (1594-1655), a pains-taking continuator of Montaigne, who did much to smooth the way

for the great prosaists and orators that followed. Aided by the prestige of the literary lights that gathered at the Hôtel Rambouillet and by the foundation of the Academy, he set deliberately to work to be to French prose the benefactor he conceived Malherbe to have been to its poetry. His work was valuable only in its results. Not so the supple strength of Pascal (1623-1662) and the limpid directness of Descartes (1596-1650), the illustrious philosophers of this century. The latter's "Discourse on Method" (1637) is the starting point of a developed argumentative style. It was from him, not Balzac, that Pascal and La Rochefoucauld learned their marvellous mastery over language. Indeed Pascal's "Provincial Letters" against the Jesuits remain unmatched to this day, a masterpiece of caustic irony and crushing contempt, clothed in a style that is a model of graceful elegance and brilliant wit. Among French prose writers Pascal is the first with whom we feel that the workman is at home with his tools. There has been gradual adaptation to new needs, but French prose has made no great advance, indeed has needed to make none, from his day to ours.

After these had gone before, progress became easy in other lines. So de Retz's "Conspiracy of Fiesco" marks a gain in picturesque historical description, while his lively, keen, and piquant "Memoirs" show a pen sharpened by use. The worldly wisdom of his maxims yields only to the cruel temper of La Rochefoucauld's cynical satire. That the underlying pessimism of these men is fairly representative of a general state of mind, is clear from the reception accorded to their work. La Rochefoucauld, especially, marks an ethical change in the popular view of life that is an essential prelude to the iconoclastic optimism of the next century. He claims literary notice, however, not only as a representative, but as an individual. Condemned by the failure of the Fronde to retirement, he amused himself and a witty circle of friends, with the luxury of an aristocratic seigneur, and with "Memoirs" and "Maxims," in which he pitilessly

unfolds the seamy side of life. Personally a good man, affectionate and beloved, he exhibits here the consistent and scornful pessimist; but he is more an aristocrat than a philosopher. He cares little for system or completeness of analysis. He takes up, one by one, such ideas as come to him, and uses them, with prudent reserves, to illustrate his theory, which is, briefly, that every virtue is a product of vices, while these are resolvable into selfishness, "in which all virtues are lost like rivers in the sea." This conclusion does not excite his anger, but rather amuses his curiosity, and that is much the effect it seems to have had on contemporary readers. Its effect on literary form was much greater. The nature of both influences will appear better from a few citations than from any brief analysis:

Vice enters into the composition of virtues just as poisons do into medicines. Prudence collects and tempers them and uses them against the ills of life.

It is not always by valor that men are valliant, nor by virtue that women are chaste.

Men would not live long in society if they were not another's dupes.
. . . The world is made up of masks.

Old men give good precepts to console themselves for being no longer able to give bad examples.

If we resist our passions, it is rather by their weakness than by our strength.

We all have strength enough to bear the ills of others.

If we had no pride, we should not complain that others had it.

We easily forget our faults when no one else knows them. . . . We try to be proud of the faults that we do not wish to forget.

We promise according to our hopes; we keep according to our fears.

We pardon those who bore us, but we cannot forgive those whom we bore.

The spirit that animates these "Maxims" can be traced in Voltaire, in Stendhal, and most clearly in the French philosopher, Chamfort, and his greater successor, the German Schopenhauer. But its value as literature was much greater and wider; for it should be clear, even from what has been cited, that in these "distilled thoughts" French prose style has attained a pregnant terseness comparable only to the best verses of Corneille. As Voltaire said, the

Maxims "accustomed men to think and to express their thoughts with a lively, precise, delicate turn," and this epigrammatic quality has ever since been a characteristic of the best writers of France.

But with all this progress in various directions French prose still lacked its La Fontaine, its easy graceful *raconteur*. This last step was taken in the letters of Madame de Sévigné, (1626-1696) most charming of all correspondents. There are some 3000 of her letters, addressed for the most part to her rather unsympathetic daughter, Madame de Grignon, and to her gay cousin, Bussy-Rabutin, author of the amusing but scandalous "*Histoire Amoureuse des Gaules*." In her younger days she had been an assiduous frequenter of the Hôtel Rambouillet, but she was shrewd enough not to fall into the vagaries that made its blue stockings the just butt of Molière. Married in 1644, she was left a widow in 1651 with a son and daughter, and after three years of retirement returned to Paris in 1654 to be a literary leader there for nearly forty years. It is not, however, till after the marriage of her daughter, in 1669, that the correspondence begins to flow freely with its inexhaustible stream of court news and town talk varied with brilliant reportorial sketches of the baths of Vichy. The succession of letters is interrupted only by rare visits to her daughter, and continues till her death. With the most charming naturalness she "lets her pen trot, bridle on the neck," "diverting herself as much in a chat with her as she labors with other correspondents." To her daughter she gives, as she says, "the top of all the baskets, the flowers of her wit, head, eyes, pen, style; and the rest get on as they can." As natural as La Fontaine, she is a model correspondent, wholly free from the artificiality of Balzac or even from that balanced poise that in another field added to the glory of Pascal and was the chief factor in that of Bossuet.

For the ultimate result of the criticism of Balzac and of the Academy, of Vaugelas, and the Hôtel Rambouillet, is not seen in La Rochefoucauld, nor in Sévigné, but in the sen-

tentious periods of La Bruyère's "Caractères" and in the polished orations of the court preachers of Louis XIV., whose ambitious energies were roused by the attitude of the king toward Gallican liberties, and by attacks of able Protestants and Jansenists. Chief among them, and perhaps the greatest pulpit orator of modern times, was Bossuet, (1627-1704) whose "Oraisons Funèbres" and historical pamphlets are masterpieces of rugged strength drawn from a literary study of the Bible, while the gentler Fénélon (1651-1715), once tutor to the Dauphin, betrays in his style a deeper classical study. His "Télémaque" was long the standard for almost all foreign students of French, but it never had the universal acceptance at home that was the lot of La Fontaine's "Fables." It is refreshing to find that Fénélon's theory was even better than his practice, for he felt and regretted the restraints to which he yielded, and was keen enough to prophesy that the only result of such trammels to literature as the purists were striving to impose must be poverty and dry rot, such as the close of the century was to see. Other great preachers of the time whose names are not unknown even outside France were Massillon, Bourdaloue, and Fléchier, while allied to them in style and mode of thought is Malebranche, whose chief charm, if not his chief merit, is a language whose picturesque clearness masks the misty conceptions that it irradiates. He marks the highest development of the classical style and contrasts in this, as in his philosophy with his contemporary Bayle, whose "Dictionnaire" (1697) was to the following century at once a storehouse of most varied learning, and the ironical herald of their skeptical infidelity.

It was in prose that the language of 1600 had most needed order and reform, and it is in prose that the great permanent advance was gained during this century. Yet the writers who have left the deepest impress on the language are not the sententious builders of polished periods, but those who, with true artistic sense, aimed only to make prose a clear and limpid vehicle of thought. A great gulf

separates Sévigné from Montaigne, but the advance was not due to the rhetoricians, to Balzac and Vaugelas, nor even to the orators, but to the thinkers and *raconteurs*, who each in his kind had something to say and cared less for meticulous correctness than for clearness and point.

No form of literature in 1600 promised less than the drama. At the end of the century it had become, what it has remained, the most important form of French literary expression. It is, therefore, of peculiar interest to see whether this great development was due to the classical spirit as represented by Boileau and the critical purists, or whether their influence was not rather a check than a stimulus. A student of comparative literature, remembering that this is the age of Shakspeare and Lope, would look for dramatic activity in France also, and in the first thirty years of the century, while the lyric muse was learning her mincing steps and prose was beginning to substitute the rapier for the quarter-staff, the number of playwrights bears witness to the growing popularity of the drama, due in great degree to the efforts of Hardy (1560-1631), who brought the stage more in touch with the audience than had been possible with the classical lucubrations of the school of Jodelle.

Hardy's reforms were quite independent of criticism and dictated by the necessities of the situation. Himself attached to a dramatic company and writing plays to be acted rather than read, he cared less for scholarly than for popular applause, and unloaded with a light heart the heavy burden of the "unities." Moreover, being compelled to various and speedy production, he was led to look for subjects to the Spanish stage, then in its most brilliant efflorescence, and so introduced an element of fresh life, and a partial naturalism, that acted like a tonic. One cannot but regret that he ignored, or feared, the greater freedom of the English stage, which would have been of priceless service to Corneille and Molière. But Hardy was no initiator. His virtues were due to his dependence on the healthy sense of

the theatre-going masses, and to this, too, may be attributed his chief vice, bombast and rhodomontade to tickle the ears of the groundlings, from which even Shakspeare is not wholly free.

Three years before his death (1628) Hardy produced the first play of Rotrou, then a genial youth of nineteen, and soon to join the dramatic collaborators of Cardinal Richelieu, where Corneille was his associate, his friend and, though only three years his senior, finally his master. Rotrou's really excellent work was obscured by the greater glories of Corneille, but it is worth noting that in his "Saint Geneste" he anticipated Corneille's favorite "Polyeucte" by treating on the stage a christian conversion and martyrdom, quite in accord with the origins of the French drama, but contradicting more recent traditions and arousing the futile anger of the purists.

Corneille, if not the greatest, is the first in time of the galaxy that make the literary glory of the age of Louis XIV., though his best work was done before the advent of that monarch. Born in 1606, he was sixteen years older than Molière and preceded Racine by a generation. The Jesuits of his native Rouen educated him for the law, but bashfulness increased his distaste for pleading, and accident coöperated with genius to draw him to dramatic work. His first play, "Mélite," was produced in Rouen in 1629. But neither this nor the dramas that followed during the next seven years, though far superior to anything that had preceded them both in naturalness and vigor, contained more than a promise of better things to come, and this promise pointed rather to the Spanish drama of intrigue and to the comedy of contemporary society than to the true field of his tragic genius. It is hard to realize that the author of "Horace" began his career by a play in which kissing and pick-a-back are prominent features, and single line repartees, "cat and puss dialogues," as Butler calls them, are bandied about like shuttle-cocks. But it may seem stranger still to find that he felt called upon to apologize for "his simple

and familiar style," saying that he feared the reader would take simplicity for ill-breeding. So strong was the artificial reaction that Malherbe had heralded, even on the popular stage. But Corneille from the first had the courage of his convictions. He never sacrificed nature to rule nor his thought to a vowel quantity. And he lost nothing by his daring. His earlier plays, enlivened by studies from the life and the happy invention of the *soubrette*, won popular success both at Rouen and at Hardy's theatre in Paris. Thus the poet was drawn to the capital and the passing sunshine of Richelieu's favor in 1634. This he lost the next year by revising too freely a dramatic concept of the great, yet petty, Cardinal, but with the public he was a favorite to the last.

The contact with the wider life of Paris and his literary associations there awakened dormant powers. "*Médée*" appeared in 1635, and in two years he had written the "*Cid*," (1636) a drama so different from the previous attempts that it hardly bears a trace of the same hand, a work that attracted universal interest and placed him at once above all his predecessors and contemporaries. Richelieu was jealous, the purists of the Academy took umbrage, less at the liberties he had taken with his Spanish original than at those he had failed to take. Indeed among the coterie of the *Précieux* the perversion of taste had reached such a point that Scudéry, a critic of some repute, asserted, and it seems believed, that the subject was ill-chosen, its irregularity unpardonable, its action clumsy, its verses bad, and its beauties stolen. The "*Cid*" does, indeed, lack the ethical depth and tragic force of "*Horace*" or "*Polyeucte*," yet, as Boileau said, "all Paris has for Rodrigue the eyes of Chimène," and the drama is the most popular on the stage of all his plays.

Corneille could not be as independent of cultured opinion as Hardy. The fierce battle that raged round the "*Cid*" caused him to withdraw for three years to Rouen. But he had faith in his genius, and with his return to Paris in 1639

there begins a period of almost unparalleled fecundity. The Roman tragedies, "Horace" and "Cinna," (1640), were followed by "Polyeucte," a story of christian martyrdom, a bold venture, for, when it was read at the Hôtel Rambouillet, "the christianity was found extremely displeasing" to these delicate souls who thought heathenism good enough for literature, which, as we have seen, was also Boileau's conviction. Then came "Pompey" and "Rodogune," a tragedy of terror, together with "Le menteur," the first good French comedy, and its sequel, all within five years, which embrace about all of his work that is read and prized to-day. There follows a period of arrest (1645-1652) with some signs of decline, but with flashes of genius as bright as any in his work, and with an occasional character of extraordinary vigor such as Phocas in "Héraclitus." At length he suspended his dramatic work for seven years (1652-1659) and turned his talent to a versified translation of the "Imitation of Christ," and to critical essays of remarkable frankness on his own plays and other dramaturgical work. Between 1659 and 1674 he wrote eleven more tragedies of unequal mediocrity, though occasional verses showed all the fire of his prime. It was on two of these that Boileau composed his famous and ill-natured epigram: "Après l'Agésilas, Hélas. Mais après l'Attila, Holà." But Boileau, who thought Racine "a very clever fellow that I had a hard time to teach to write verse," is recorded as of the opinion that the three great writers of his day were "Corneille, Molière, and—myself." Even in old age he never lost popularity. But he lived in narrow circumstances, if not in poverty. "I am satisfied with glory and hungry for money," he said in these last years with a grimness that seems to characterize his social relations. He would never curry favor, and Racine tells us he suffered in consequence. He had admirers, but not patrons, and he died in comparative neglect in 1684. Indeed the development of taste was leading away from him, and in the next century his fame suffered a partial eclipse. His own time and ours were

more fitted to comprehend and appreciate him than the intervening period of iconoclasm and perverted criticism.

The first impression made on an attentive reader even of Corneille's best work is his unevenness. No poet rises to grander heights than he. If we judge him by his best, he will rank with the greatest, but many a lesser talent is more sustained and may attain a higher average. Molière saw this: "My friend Corneille," he said, "has a familiar spirit who inspires him with the finest verses in the world, but sometimes the spirit deserts him and then it fares ill with him." Therefore, Corneille lends himself admirably to citation. Many of his lines cling to the memory, and any Alexandrine with a rush of sound and startling pregnancy of suggestion seems a "Cornelian" verse. The latter point may be illustrated. One must be a Frenchman to feel the former.

"I am master of myself as well as of the world," says the Emperor Augustus ("Cinna"). "Rome is no longer in Rome. It is all where I am," says Sertorius to Pompey. The assassinated Attila, strangled in his blood, "speaks but in stifled gasps what he imagines he speaks." What concentrated force in the reply of the father of Horace: "What would you have him do against three?" "That he should die." Or in Medea's: "What resource have you in so utter a disaster?" "Myself! Myself, I say, and that is enough." "Follow not my steps," says Polyeucte, "or leave your errors." Finally, since these citations might be extended almost indefinitely, consider the closing lines of Cleopatra's curse in "Rodogune": "To wish you all misfortune together, May a son be born of you who shall resemble me;" and Camille's upon Rome: "May I with my own eyes see this thunderbolt fall on her, See her houses in ashes and thy laurels in dust, See the last Roman in his last sigh, Myself alone be cause of it, and die of the joy."¹

¹ Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers (Cinna, v., 3). Rome n'est plus dans Rome. Elle est toute où je suis (Sertor. iii., 1). Ce n'est plus qu'en sanglots qu'il dit ce qu'il croit dire (Attila, v., 2). Que voulez-vous

It is lines like these, and they are many, that justify Fa-guet in calling Corneille's language "the most masculine, energetic, at once sobre and full, that was ever spoken in France," and his verses "the most beautiful that ever fell from a French pen." It is such lines that induce Saintsbury, with perhaps unguarded enthusiasm, to call him "the greatest writer of France, the only one who, up to our own time, can take rank with the Dantes and Shaksperes of other countries." (*Encyc. Brit.*, vi., 419). It is of them that Voltaire says: They earned Corneille the name Great "to distinguish him, not from his brother Thomas, but from the rest of mankind."

It was said of Corneille's tragedies that they aroused admiration rather than tragic fear. He does not seek to interest us in the fate of his characters, but rather, as Saintsbury has observed, in the way they bear it and in their haughty disdain for it. So it is natural that the "linked sweetness" of amorous talk that takes so large a place in Racine seems to him rather contemptible. There is no philandering or fine-spun sentiment even in the loves of Chimène and Rodrigue, and in "Sertorius," Aristie cuts short her lover with the lines: "Let us leave, sir, let us leave for petty souls, This grovelling barter of sighs and loves." But tragedy, with the limitations of Corneille's method, forbids the resource of a minor plot, and involves much talk with little action. So his disdain of the endless subject of talk leaves him often with scenes and even acts where interest hopelessly flags. Even his noblest work is not without monotony. It is always a like grandeur of soul that he represents, a like admiration that he excites. One who

qu'il se fit contre trois? — Qu'il mourût! (*Hor.* iii., 6). *Dan* sun si grand revers que vous reste-t-il? — *Moi! Moi*, dis-je, et c'est assez (*Médée*, i., 2). *Ne suivez point mes pas ou quittez vos erreurs* (*Poly.* v., 3). Et, pour vous souhaitez tous les malheurs ensemble, *Puisse naître de vous un fils qui me ressemble* (*Rodog.* v., 4). *Puissé-je de mes yeux y voir tomber ce foudre, Voir ses maisons en cendre, et tes lauriers en poudre, Voir le dernier Romain à son dernier soupir, Moi seule, en être cause, et mourir de plaisir* (*Hor.* iv., 5).

reads many plays of Corneille consecutively finds his appreciation dulled, and the public who witnessed them consecutively might have come to the same feeling. Still, there is a permanent quality in his work as in Shakspeare's, a touch of nature that Racine, at his best, lacks. The superb declamations of *Camille*, of *Auguste*, of *Cornélie* ("Pompée") to name no others, will thrill audiences everywhere, as long as the antinomies of love and patriotism, honor and duty, perplex men's souls. But oratory is far from being the only use of language, and by giving to French when in a very plastic state a sententious imprint, Corneille exercised an influence on the future of his mother tongue, very great but not altogether helpful to its healthy growth and further development.

The rival of Corneille's later years was Racine, whom Boileau reckoned as his pupil, so that we may regard him as representative of the regular Academic drama. More stable in temperament, his work was more even in character and polished in execution, and by close adherence to rule he long and successfully masked the weaker side of his genius. Such formal correctness suited the age of Louis, as it did that of Anne. But in less skillful hands than his it sank quickly to a mannerism as dreary as it was contemptible. It is indirectly due to him that tragedy hardly lifts its head from the waters of oblivion between his death and the rise of the Romantic School.

Racine (1639-1699), after an education at Port-Royal, to which he owed the development of his literary tastes and his love for Greek, completed his studies at Paris, and at twenty was already author of poems that earned him the rewards of the court and the condemnation of critics. But he had soon the good fortune to meet La Fontaine and Molière, and was persuaded to try tragedy. His first drama, "*The Natural Enemies*," a study from Æschylus' "*Seven Against Thebes*," is in style a feeble imitation of Corneille. His next work, "*Alexandre*" (1665), was also produced under the influence of Molière, and marked grow-

ing power, but Racine broke with him that year, and his later pieces were acted in the rival theatre of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. He now became the pupil of Boileau, who was inclined to attribute to himself the success of his diligent scholar, not without some justice, for Racine's talent was of the kind that is formed by criticism and profits by careful elaboration. This was illustrated by "*Andromaque*," (1667) a play that "made almost as much talk as the '*Cid*,'" according to the testimony of Perrault, rousing the admiration of the friends and the scorn of the enemies of Boileau. These latter the dramatist, with the critic's coöperation, presently satirized in the Aristophanean "*Plaideurs*," which has unique merits and shows the author more emancipated in his versification than he had been or was to be.

Critics had said that Racine's tragic talent was limited to the painting of love. To prove them wrong he wrote "*Britannicus*" (1669) which went a long way to prove them right. The piece was not a success, and he returned the next year to the old theme with "*Bérénice*," a play that established the ascendancy of the young poet over the aging Corneille, who had attempted the same subject. The plays that followed, "*Bajazet*" (1672) and "*Mithradate*" (1673), show greater suppleness and strength, but it is still the same well-worn theme. Yet they mark the height of the poet's fame to which "*Iphigénie*" (1674) added nothing, while "*Phèdre*" (1677), exaggerating the defects of his qualities, failed to hold the popular favor. Racine withdrew from the stage as Corneille had done. But his return to it twelve years later in "*Esther*" (1689) and "*Athalie*" (1691) showed his genius at its highest point. Indeed some regard "*Athalie*" as the masterpiece of the entire French stage. The causes of this superiority were also the causes of its lukewarm public reception. Both plays were written for Madame de Maintenon's great school for noblewomen at St. Cyr. Hence, by a happy necessity, love-making was suppressed, and a greater scope was given to action, in imitation of sixteenth century models, than Boileau would have

counselled or approved. This glorious aftermath closed the poet's literary career. He died in 1699.

It accords with Racine's conception of dramatic art that his scenes are laid in foreign countries where artificial conventions are masked by the strangeness of the environment. But there is no attempt at any local color. The Greece of Agamemnon was not more foreign to the Versailles of Louis XIV. than it was to the Greece of Racine's "Iphigénie." This is least felt in "Les Plaideurs," in "Esther," and "Athalie," for here the poet is more free, but it should be noted that in all his work the artificiality is in the received notion of tragic art rather than in the literary instinct of the man. At his most plastic period he had been associated with Molière, and to the last, so far as the conventions allowed, he tried to do what Molière had done in comedy, to study and paint with an honest and naturalistic psychology the passions and feelings, dissociated from any relations of country or age. His ideal, as he states it, is "a simple action, with few incidents, such as might take place in a single day, which advancing steadily toward its end is sustained only by the interests and passions of the characters," who, as he says elsewhere, "must be neither too perfect nor too base, so that hearers may recognize themselves in them; not altogether culpable, nor wholly innocent, with a virtue capable of weakness, that their faults may make them less detested than pitied." His interest, then, is in character, not in action, while Corneille always sought the crises of history.

Now this conception of tragedy is much more akin to comedy than any that had preceded it. It is a study of human passion and weakness as in Molière, but here the pitiless analysis is pushed to the point where amused interest yields to dread, and the smile to terror.¹ It is this realistic portrayal of passions common to all men of all time that keeps Racine's hold on the minds of Frenchmen, in spite of the constraints of his form, for of all Europeans they

¹ This point is ingeniously elaborated by Faguet, 169 seq.

perhaps are most willing to condone this trammel to the free development of genius. Yet apart from this his talent was not of supreme rank. He had not the tragic grandeur of Corneille, still less of Shakspeare, and even in his chosen sphere he had not the keen psychological insight of Molière.

We are thus brought to the greatest of all writers of social comedy, incomparably the greatest French writer of his century, and perhaps the greatest name in all their literature, Jean Baptiste Poquelin, the first Parisian among the great writers of France, who on becoming identified with the stage took, and made immortal, the name of Molière (1622-1673). His parents were well to do, he was carefully educated by the Jesuits, and his philosophical studies with Gassendi left many traces in his work and more in his life. Then, like Corneille, he studied law. But presently we find him associated with a dramatic company, "L'Illustre Théâtre," which left Paris in 1646 to try its fortune in the provinces. During some years of wandering and precarious existence, Molière furnished their repertoire with light farces, and at length with more finished comedies, "L'Etourdi" (1653 or 1655) and "Le Dépit Amoureux" (1656). The company, or at least Molière, was now financially prosperous, and, in 1658, after more than twelve years' absence, he arranged for their return to Paris. This wandering life was a priceless school to him in the study of middle class men and manners. The future social comedian could hardly have used these years to better advantage.

In spite of borrowed Italian elements these early comedies were enthusiastically received and indeed they were much the best that France could show. But both were cast in the shade by "Les Précieuses Ridicules," the first dramatic satire on cultured society in France. The blue-stockings of the Hôtel Rambouillet, or perhaps their bourgeois imitators who, according to the "Roman Bourgeois," abounded in Paris, their affected language and manners, were held up to such good-humored ridicule that success was immediate and universal. Indeed the play has

not yet lost its comic force, for learning has not wholly supplanted the affectation of it even among the women of to-day.

Equally typical of Molière is his next play, "Sganarelle" (1660) the first of those gay yet profound farces, which still hold the stage because they raise first a laugh and then a thoughtful smile. Then, in "L'Ecole des Maris" we have a character study, with the plot adapted from Terence's "Adelphi," but with a pathos in the treatment of the aged lover that is very characteristic. In February of the next year Molière himself married a young woman of his troupe more than twenty years his junior, much to his future sorrow, though she was probably not so black as contemporary scandal asserted and literary scavengers delight to repeat.

In 1662 he touched more dangerous ground in "L'Ecole des Femmes," a covert attack on hypocrisy and literal orthodoxy. This unchained a storm of rage, nursed by jealousy, such as actor-poet has seldom faced. He replied to his critics first in the witty "Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes" and then in the "Impromptu de Versailles," where his roused indignation did not scruple to name opponents and caricature rivals whom he scourged with caustic cruelty. In 1664 he renewed his attack on that most contemptible of all vices with three acts of "Tartuffe, the Hypocrite." This open satire of false devotion earned him from these professors of peace and good-will the pious wish that this "demon in human flesh" might "speedily be burned on earth that he might burn the sooner in hell." It was five years before he was suffered to act the entire play, but the king's favor remained constant and Molière continued the fight with the yet more daring "Don Juan," while light farces such as "L'Amour Médecin," relieved the serious contest.

But, except for "Tartuffe," it is with 1666 that the great manner of Molière begins with "Le Misanthrope," which Boileau, Lessing, and Goethe unite to regard as his profoundest study of human character. Slowly but surely it

has won its way to the foremost place in popular esteem also, and is now perhaps the most generally read and quoted of all his plays. Alceste, the noble pessimist soured by experience, Philinte, the easy-going social trimmer, the conceited poetaster Oronte, the witty and censorious Célimène, are types as enduring as society.

Failing health now began to lessen his productivity, though not his wit. But in 1668 he brought out two masterpieces, the extremely witty "Amphitryon," and "George Dandin," type of the man who marries above his station and suffers the consequences. Then followed that wonderful psychic picture "L'Avare," the Miser. Then, for three years (1669-1671), a succession of light farces, among them the immortal "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," marks the recrudescence of his malady, but in "Les Femmes Savantes" the poet returned to the subject of the "Précieuses," and with his maturer powers attacked the admirers of pedantry and the affectation of learning, a subject always new, that in our own day has inspired one of the happiest efforts of the modern stage, "Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie." This was his last important work. Already a consumptive cough was wearing him away. On February 17, 1673, as he was acting on a new farce, "Le Malade Imaginaire," he ruptured a blood-vessel in a spasm of coughing, and was carried from the stage to die. He was buried half clandestinely, for the Archbishop of Paris forbade the clergy to say prayers for him, but he had given liberally of his wealth and the poor crowded to his funeral; yet the site of his grave is now uncertain.

Molière came at a propitious time, for comedy had not suffered from the false classicism of tragedy, and if little of merit had yet been done, there was promise in the general interest, both popular and cultured, in the subject. The danger was that Spanish or classical models might be too slavishly followed. In his hands comedy won a dignity and an independence that gave it the freedom of conscious strength. And at the same time he broke a way of escape

from the "Alexandrine prison." Some of his very best work was done in prose, and he never allowed verse to fetter his thoughts or be more than a subordinate means to a higher end. Indeed, he could not have polished his work as Racine did. In thirteen years he had written twenty-five plays, seven of them serious masterpieces, he had been stage-manager, actor, and often manager of the royal festivals at Versailles. Life to him had been work and it was fitting that he should die in harness. A man of indomitable energy, no dramatist ever united so much wit with so much seriousness as Molière. The purpose to hold the mirror up to nature that she may see her face and mend her ways gives even his roaring farces an element of true comedy. But this purpose brings with it a tendency to typify phases of character rather than to present the complexity of human nature, a disposition long characteristic of French comedy.¹ In the analysis of character Shakspeare is more profound, and he tells a story with far more dramatic force. Indeed to Molière the story, for its own sake, is a very minor matter; but Shakspeare has less of the direct contact with and influence on contemporary life that is the result of Molière's naturalistic method and his study of the immediate environment.

This method was that of his successors, of whom Regnard only need be named, though his best work is disappointing whether regarded in the light of what had preceded or of the French comedy of to-day. For the tendency of the coming age was away from naturalistic thought. Yet as one reviews the seventeenth century and the "classical" period, it is clear that realism was characteristic of its most successful work. It began with an attempt to codify and regulate the individual conquests of the sixteenth century. Malherbe in poetry, Balzac in prose, undertook to be lawgivers for language and style. Just in so far as the century yielded, and the mental lassitude of

¹ Such titles as "The Miser," "The Misanthrope," or Regnard's "The Gambler," "The Distracted," illustrate this.

the reaction from the Renaissance made it easy to yield, to this gospel of artificiality, stagnation followed. In prose it was least possible to crib and confine, and here there was the most varied development, from which it was easy to purge the chaff and the tinsel. In the drama the yoke was more felt and in poetry most of all. But those poets and dramatists who were able to rise above these artificial constraints and to build upon the foundations laid by the giants of the sixteenth century a structure of their own, the independent students of nature and society, La Fontaine, Molière, in a greater degree Corneille, in a less degree Racine, are those who are prized to-day, and prized most for that which the strict "classical" purists would have condemned.

B. W. WELLS.